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ABSTRACT

Trends in pre-college philosophy teaching are discussed. Today philosophy, especially at the elementary level, is becoming fashionable. Research has shown that even minimal training in philosophy improves students' reading and mathematical abilities as well as general skills such as reasoning and creativity. A study examining the formal training and attitudes of teachers of pre-college philosophy showed that many were already engaged in teaching pre-college philosophy in their own sense of what counts as philosophy. Teachers with significant preparation in academic philosophy recognized that philosophy is a distinct academic discipline requiring formal training. Certified teachers with little philosophy preparation did not recognize it as being significantly different from history or social studies. Studies have shown that there is a variability in student outcomes associated with teacher preparation. If pre-college philosophy is to succeed, teachers need formalized training, and all educators must be taught to recognize what counts as philosophy. (RM)

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Pre-College Philosophy: Will it Get its Day in Court

by

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presented at

Harvard University International Conference
on
Critical Thinking

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I

Logic, or the study of effective reasoning, has been a central philosophical concern since the time of the ancient Greeks. With the exception of mathematicians, few others have formally attempted to distinguish effective from ineffective reasoning, that is, until recently. During the past decade or so, scholars in a number of diverse disciplines have "discovered" the importance of identifying good thinking and distinguishing it from poor or ineffective thinking. Cognitive psychologists have declared "problem-solving" a legitimate concern of psychology, educators espouse the fundamental role of "critical thinking" as a curricular "basic," computer scientists have drawn attention to the practice of information processing and philosophers have begun talking about informal logic as a distinct area of the traditional study of logic.[1]

Since philosophers have been engaged in the study of effective reasoning for over two millennia one would expect them to be more informed about these matters than others who have only recently acquired a professional interest in such. In addition, it is only reasonable to expect that if philosophers put their acquired knowledge to work in behalf of public education, noticable student achievements should follow. Philosophers have brought their accumulated knowledge and skills to bear upon public education and the results have been predictably impressive. In the 1950's, philosopher Patrick Suppes introduced gifted junior high school age students to symbolic logic through a computer assisted instruction program. The students' technical achievements were shown to be similar to that of a college freshman taking a similar introductory course at the college level.[2] In the early sixties, a Carnegie funded experiment in pre-college instruction in high school philosophy was again shown to be a resounding success.[3] And, finally, in the 1970's, a number of philosophers began entering the elementary schools and junior high schools to teach philosophic skills to pre-adolescents. This last venture was spear-

headed by Professor Matthew Lipman and his successes have been touted in the New York Times, Newsweek magazine, Time magazine, numerous smaller newspapers, television and radio reports, and the recent Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities Report to name but a few.

If attempts to introduce philosophy to the public school curriculum have succeeded so grandly, then it is difficult to understand why philosophy still has so little currency in the public school curriculum. There are several causes for the limited role of philosophy in public school education today. First, early attempts to teach symbolic logic to students through a C.A.I. program of instruction were doomed from the start because the cost of the necessary computer hardware was prohibitive. Since few teachers have engaged in the formal study of symbolic logic, the software program had to be extensive and highly interactive. In other words, for the practice of C.A.I. instruction in logic to be successful the program had to insure that the student could learn logic at the computer terminal with little or no assistance from the teacher. As mentioned above, Patrick Suppes constructed such a program but it required so much computer memory that few schools could hope to secure it for their students.

The Carnegie experiment in pre-college philosophy for high school students was widely applauded in the Chicago schools where it was implemented. Subsequent to the completion of the experiment four of the six pilot schools decided to continue instruction in philosophy.[4] The other two schools discontinued instruction in philosophy because of pressing financial exigencies. During the experimental program each instructor in the program possessed a significant background in academic philosophy. When the program ended, the schools continuing instruction in philosophy had to find state-certified teachers to replace the philosophy teachers who worked in the experimental

program. Since there is no state-certification in Illinois for public school teachers of philosophy, the schools had to find teachers of basic subjects who also knew something about philosophy. Unfortunately, people who study philosophy seldom become teachers and people who become teachers seldom study philosophy. The result was that only one of the four schools was able to hire a teacher with a substantial background in philosophy. The school which hired a qualified instructor in philosophy saw its program thrive. The other three schools saw their programs dwindle. I spoke with the superintendent of one of the latter schools. He attributed the decline in students interest in philosophy at his school to an unpredictable shift of fancy. The school district was becoming less elitist and philosophy was a vestige of upper middle-class values. He noted, with satisfaction, that the person teaching philosophy was certified to teach English. So, as student interest in philosophy declined, the "philosophy" instructor was assigned sections of English to teach. I was allowed to observe a class in high school philosophy at this same school. The instructor, who happened to have had a masters of divinity studies, taught philosophy as if it were merely a list of truths to be memorized. I saw little in that class that reminded me of philosophic practice. Apparently, philosophy was failing in this school simply because students were not being engaged in the practice of philosophy. As mentioned above, the superintendent saw the declining interest in philosophy as simply a function of passing fancy. I, in turn, saw in this school a problem with what was being taught, or more accurately, what was not being taught. Philosophy was being talked about, no one was "doing" philosophy. If students are to philosophize then they need an experienced mentor who will engage them in philosophic discourse. Without an experienced mentor, students will have little opportunity to reap the benefits of philosophizing. There are few

philosophically-sophisticated instructors in public secondary education today. Consequently, there is little reason to expect that philosophy will show itself to be a driving force in contemporary public education. No doubt, occassional courses in philosophy will continue to be offered at various schools. But, unless those teaching such courses know how to do philosophy we can expect that such courses will produce mixed results.

Pre-college instruction at the elementary school and junior high school level is continuing to receive much positive attention. Indeed, such critics of public education as Mortimer Adler, recently admitted to me during a panel discussion in which we both participated, that initiating a program in philosophy for children would be a positive step toward achieving the goals of his controversial Paideia Proposal.[5] The continued interest in philosophy for children by Adler, and by others far less inclined philosophically, is probably attributed to three causes. First, since it is still a relatively new phenomenon and has not yet had time to pass into and out of fashion, pre-college philosophy retains an aura of novelty about it. This is certainly curious since philosophy for children can easily be shown to date back to Plato's Meno and in recent times to Wittgenstein's work with elementary school children in Post-World War I Austria. Second, the idea of philosophy for children has made its way into the public schools very slowly and usually under the auspices of trained philosophers. Third, pre-college instruction in philosophy at the elementary and junior high school level has been taught almost exclusively as a skill and not as the study of a given subject matter. The fact that leading proponents have explicitly emphasized the notion that philosophy is a skill has no doubt, helped keep philosophy for children from the grasp of pedants. Nevertheless, as philosophy for children becomes more fashionable, it becomes more attractive to those who have a developed philosophic sense and to those who do

not, to those who distinguish between effective and ineffective reasoning and to those who do not, and finally, to those who are genuinely in the business of making sense of the world and even to those who are in the business of forcing the world into their way of making sense.

The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, under the direction of Professor Matthew Lipman, has been accumulating an impressive array of evidence demonstrating that those who are minimally trained in philosophy can make a statistically significant difference in children's reading, and mathematical abilities as well as in more generalizable skills such as reasoning and creativity.[6] The success of Lipman's work has attracted many followers. Some are philosophers who themselves go into public school classrooms to demonstrate to parents and teachers alike the benefits of engaging children in philosophic reasoning. Others are laypersons who, as in the case of the experiment in Denton, Texas, think that if they just purchase the right materials any professional teacher can get children to do philosophy. As the Denton experience so clearly indicates this simply is not so.[7] A particular text, a provocative question and a willingness to listen is not all there is to doing philosophy. To do philosophy one must know how to use a particular text philosophically. To do philosophy one must know how to pursue a provocative question in a rigorous and systematic manner. To do philosophy one must not only listen to what others are saying but be able to discriminate among common fallacies such as affirming the consequent, equivocation and amphiboly. One must be able to recognize which terms need further definition and at what point the speaker has adequately clarified his position. All this and more is part of what it means to do philosophy and this is not the sort of stuff one picks up simply be reading the introduction to a teacher's manual. Philosophy is a skill and as such it must be treated as a skill. To learn a skill one cannot simply read about it, one must have

the opportunity to practice it.

Teachers who have not learned to reason effectively can, at best, only talk about it. Children who have only heard talk about effective reasoning will not learn much about how to do it. Teachers who know how to do philosophy can do at least two things in the public school classroom that many other teachers cannot. First, they can role model how an effective reasoner operates. Second, they know what counts as effective reasoning so they know when others have demonstrated a facility with it.

II

Since the practice of pre-college philosophy-particularly at the elementary school level-appears so promising at this time, the American Philosophical Association Committee on Pre-College Instruction in Philosophy thought it important to survey participants in current pre-college philosophy programs. The purpose of these surveys is to solicit responses descriptive of the formal training and attitudes of institutional participants in such programs. The Committee arranged for the Institute for Logic and Cognitive Studies at the University of Houston-Clear Lake to run surveys on the following populations: public school administrators of pre-college philosophy programs, college professors affiliated with pre-college philosophy programs, parents and classroom teachers. Although the number of respondents is rather modest at this time, each survey instrument is itself rather sizeable. Thus we believe that some interesting trends are being revealed by these surveys.

In light of what has been said above, there is one trend that is particularly suggestive. There seems to be a profound difference among teachers of pre-college philosophy regarding their sense of what counts as philosophy. In general, we found that people with significant preparation in academic philosophy recognized that philosophy is a distinct academic discipline requiring formal training on the part of teachers. Certified teachers with little

preparation in philosophy did not recognize it as being significantly different from history or social studies. The teachers were given a survey of twenty-six items to which they were to respond by circling the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a given statement. In addition, they were asked to fill out an information sheet indicating the extent of their academic training and their philosophical training in particular. They were also given a chance to respond to several open-ended items after completing the survey. In the table below you can see the correlations between pre-college instruction in philosophy with various levels of philosophic training and their response to three questions selected as an indicator of philosophical sophistication.

CHI SQUARED CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE EXTENT OF TRAINING IN PHILOSOPHY AND PERCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY AS A SPECIALIZED DISCIPLINE

Q#1		No Philosophy Training	Some Philosophy Training (3-12hrs)	Degree in Philosophy	
Agree	(O)	13	11	2	26
	(E)	7	10	9	
Disagree	(O)	6	14	20	40
	(E)	12	15	13	
		19	25	22	

df = 2

χ^2 = 17.46 (Significant @ 99% level of confidence)

Q#5		No Philosophy Training	Some Philosophy Training (3-12hrs)	Degree in Philosophy	
Agree	(O)	14	16	13	43
Disagree	(E)	13	16	14	
Agree	(O)	5	8	8	21
Disagree	(E)	6	8	7	
		19	24	21	

df = 2

$\chi^2 = .46$

Q#24		No Philosophy Training	Some Philosophy Training (3-12hrs)	Degree in Philosophy	
Agree	(O)	2	5	2	9
Disagree	(E)	3	3	3	
Agree	(O)	16	19	20	55
Diagree	(E)	15	21	19	
		19	24	21	

df = 2

$\chi^2 = 2.3$

1. My own impression is that philosophy is the study of a particular subject matter similar to the study of history or social studies.

5. To teach philosophy adequately at my level of instruction, teachers should receive specialized training in pedagogy.

24. To teach philosophically teachers do not need to take coursework in philosophy.

The dichotomy between philosophically-trained instructors and instructors of pre-college philosophy with little or no academic training in philosophy is particularly striking. If groups of teachers view philosophy in starkly different ways then what those groups of teachers do in the classroom can be expected to vary as well. This variance can be expected to show itself not merely in pedagogic style but in teacher objectives and student outcomes as well. For example, recent studies of Lipman's philosophy for children program indicates that with teachers even minimally trained in philosophy one can expect children's reasoning skills, creativity, mathematical and reading abilities to increase. In contrast, a study performed in Denton, Texas showed that teachers untrained in philosophy failed to produce significant improvements in children's reasoning, reading and mathematics abilities despite the fact that they used the same curricular materials as used in the Lipman program.[8]

The preliminary results of our study suggest several possible reasons for this distinct variance in student performance. First, teachers with no academic training in philosophy tended to envision philosophy as something similar to history or social studies. Teachers who had some minimal preparation in philosophy tended to see philosophy as dissimilar to subjects such as history and social studies. And, surely anyone who has had a course in logic, epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, analytic

philosophy or contemporary philosophy in general can no doubt empathize with this perception. On the other hand, several of the students with at least one degree in philosophy showed some tolerance toward the idea that philosophy did share some similarities with other disciplines such as history or social studies. However, since our instrument was not designed to query further into this matter one can only speculate why this might be so. On this matter I offer the following observation based upon my own experience.

As a person studies philosophy in depth he or she learns that philosophy stands at the crossroads of all other academic disciplines. As researchers in any academic discipline theorize about what should count as a knowledge claim within their discipline they find themselves in a metadisciplinary pursuit, namely, epistemology. Similarly, as scholars theorize about how ideas within that discipline can be most responsibly organized, they are engaging in a second metadisciplinary pursuit, namely, logic. Both epistemology and logic are traditional sub-disciplines of philosophy dating back to antiquity. Thus, the intellectual foundations of any academic discipline is necessarily the product of philosophizing. And, of course, it is philosophers who are especially interested, and presumably skilled, in the enterprise of philosophy. On the other hand, those who have studied philosophy in some depth quickly learn to appreciate that philosophy can rarely - if ever - be done in a vacuum. For example, to do philosophy of science, language or education requires that philosophers learn something about what counts as science, language or education within the relevant community of specialists. Consequently, advanced students of philosophy learn that philosophy stands in a genuinely interdependent relationship with all other disciplines. Thus, when asked if philosophy is similar to history or social studies it is not surprising that a few would hesitatingly respond in the affirmative, keeping in mind that

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philosophy is also similar, in a sense, to mathematics, physics and even art criticism. In any case, the data indicates that teachers with no academic training in academic philosophy are far more likely to identify it with history and social studies and this is an important phenomenon deserving of further research, particularly as philosophy gains credibility as a worthy addition to the public school curriculum.

Another possible explanation of the variance in student outcomes associated with teacher preparation in philosophy is suggested by survey items five and twenty-four reported above. Regardless of the teacher's level of philosophical training there was general agreement among the three groups that training in pedagogical technique could improve one's classroom performance. On the other hand, teachers with no academic training in philosophy tended not to see formal training in philosophy as essential to teaching it. Admittedly, this alleged trend in item twenty-four is not statistically significant at this time, though the level of significance is certainly dissimilar from that in item five. More importantly however is that survey instruments received in the last 30 days are expected to increase this level of significance according to a cursory review of the data made by this author at the time of this writing. Formally-trained teachers in philosophy saw the matter quite differently. As a group they saw training in philosophy as necessary as training in pedagogy. Certainly, this seems reasonable. No doubt there are some gifted teachers, such as Socrates or the fabled Professor Kingsfield, who do an exemplary job of teaching without the benefit of formal training in pedagogy. Similarly, there are a few gifted intellectuals, such as Socrates and the physicist Thomas Kuhn, who do an exemplary job of philosophizing without the benefit of much prior training in philosophy. Nevertheless, such individuals represent the exception rather than the rule. For the majority of us, philosophic

understanding comes only upon the heels of much formal training. Similarly, pedagogical finesse comes, if at all, only after we have learned to become attentive to the characteristics of our individual role in the teacher/learner dynamic. Most of the teachers with formal training in philosophy seemed to appreciate this common sense observation. On the other hand, few teachers with no formal training in philosophy agreed.

If there exists a strong positive correlation between training in philosophy and philosophic proficiency, and certainly, this is not an unreasonable assumption, then lack of training in philosophy must be similarly correlated with a lack of philosophic proficiency. Consequently, we have reason to suspect that teachers with no training in philosophy know very little philosophy. Teachers with very little knowledge of philosophy will teach even less. And, finally, teachers with very little knowledge of philosophy can be depended upon to say some outlandish things about philosophy such as "a person can teach philosophy having little or no knowledge of philosophy as long as they know enough pedagogical techniques."

One may accuse me of being overly harsh in my assessment of the causes for the variance of responses recorded in our study. Certainly, my inferences have exceeded what could be firmly supported by our present data. But,I have taken the liberty of suggesting possible explanations to provoke further study into this most important area. Clearly, my hypothesized explanations are not inconsistent with the data and they agree with my own experiences and that of several of my philosopher colleagues.

Introducing children to the skills of philosophical analysis as a means for improving their reasoning skill has shown itself to be a fruitful practice. To avoid having this practice abandoned because of inept attempts at implementation requires that we alert the educational community to the idea that

successful courses in pre-college philosophy depend largely on teacher sophistication in philosophical analysis, logic and argumentation and not merely on the use of a particular curriculum, a set of issues or a style of questioning. This may seem rather obvious and hardly worth mentioning. The fact is however, that as our data indicates many people are already engaged in teaching pre-college philosophy even though they know little about the subject and conceive it quite differently than their philosophically sophisticated colleagues. If the courses these latter individuals are teaching fail to produce a positive response in students it would be a grave mistake to attribute the failure to pre-college philosophy rather than to the teachers who have mistakenly described their activities as philosophical. This, of course, is the case with all new curricular innovations. One need only call to mind the experience of the so-called "new math" to appreciate the fate of an ineptly implemented curricular innovation.

Pre-college philosophy is particularly vulnerable to the devastating effects of inept implementation. On the one hand, there are very few school administrators or school teachers who have had sufficient training in philosophy to recognize the difference between it and the mere expression of personal opinion. Thus, even after becoming convinced that pre-college philosophy is a practice of considerable merit they are unable to distinguish between experts and charlatans who have recently appeared upon the scene who claim to be able to teach pre-college philosophy or inservice teachers in pre-college philosophy (For example, I have personal knowledge of two individuals who are inservicing teachers in philosophy even though neither has had a single graduate class in philosophy, no coursework in logic and at best one or two undergraduate courses in philosophy).

On the other hand, there are even fewer people among the lay public who

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are in a position to distinguish genuine philosophy from the mere expression of opinion. They hear sportscasters ask baseball players "What is your philosophy of getting a hit?" And, they hear the baseball players respond by saying something like "I always try to make the bat hit the ball." Now, if one is a baseball player it surely makes good sense when batting to try to make the bat hit the ball. Nevertheless, merely having a good idea is not the essence of doing philosophy. Philosophers know this, sportscasters and sportsfans typically do not. Thus, if a public school program calls itself pre-college philosophy, the layman typically assumes it is what it says it is. If, after several months, the program produces no positive change in the students, it is all too easy for the layman to conclude that philosophy has no place in the curriculum. This is in contrast to the situation with the new math, where the public decried the particular curricular program but never wavered in their appreciation for mathematics as an essential object of study. If a pre-college philosophy program fails it will not be the individual program that is blamed it will be the entire discipline of philosophy. After all how can anything that is just opinion teach anything of merit!

Philosophers can be blamed for not doing a better job of keeping the public and their academic colleagues in education informed about what philosophy is and what it can do for the non-philosopher. However, assigning blame for past failures will do nothing to get philosophy into the schools as a standard form of instruction in critical thinking.

For centuries philosophy had been to some extent within the purview of every educated person. Certainly each person lives through a number of philosophically provocative situations in but a day. To ignore or address a philosophical issue in a non-philosophical way is as mindless as ignoring or addressing a problem amenable to empirical investigation in a non-empirical way.

If the educational community is serious about teaching critical thinking through philosophy it is imperative that educators learn to recognize philosophy as distinct from other academic disciplines. Only then can responsible assessments be made of the effectiveness of curricular programs in philosophy as a means for teaching children critical thinking.

In closing let me offer a few remarks about just what counts as philosophy and how teachers and school administrators can begin to assess whether or not a given activity is philosophical. Of course, it is common philosophical practice to issue frequent disclaimers and so I will begin my concluding remarks with the following. Although philosophers pride themselves on their ability to use language precisely in the giving of clear and perspicuous explanations, there is no more agreement on what counts as philosophy among philosophers than there is among physicists about what counts as physics or among sociologists about what counts as sociology. In each case there exists a set of claims that are commonly accepted and another set that are commonly excluded in defining the essence of the respective disciplines. So it is in philosophy. Philosophers are generally agreed that philosophy focuses upon careful reasoning, questions of a non-empirical nature and that it is quite distinct from a mere expression of opinions beyond that vigorous debate is sure ensue. To avoid inhouse debate with philosophers and to say something informative to non-philosophers I will conclude my paper by discussing briefly the contrast between philosophy and mere personal opinion.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein one suggested that philosophy is a sickness. Truly, the philosopher does seem to have an almost pathological drive to avoid endorsing any proposition which is false. Wittgenstein, on many occassions, showed himself to be subject to this same pathological aversion. Philosophers are just not willing to settle a matter by resort to

mere opinion whether their own or that of an esteemed authority. Indeed, it is no doubt this aversion to mere opinion that causes them to take on the role of gadfly. And, as the life of Socrates reveals, an unwillingness to accept the opinions of authority figures can sometimes lead to life-threatening situations. Nevertheless, the philosopher persists. His respect for truth is not to be diminished by convention or other social pressure. While the philosopher desires truth many admit it may be beyond reach. Error, however is within the reach of everyone and ought to be avoidable at least some of the time. Thus, in philosophy it is clearly not the case that philosophers would ever seriously endorse the notion that one idea is as good as another. Even a philosopher as unconventional as Paul Feyerabend is not willing to prescribe epistemological anarchy for philosophy.[9]

Philosophy is a matter of sorting out servicable as opposed to unserviceable or less serviceable propositions. A proposition is serviceable to the extent it helps us create a world we can understand. A proposition is unserviceable if it fails to contribute to our understanding of the world, and, it is less serviceable if it fails to contribute to our understanding of the world as well as some other more serviceable account. Philosophical conclusions build worlds.[10] It matters to those building philosophical worlds whether or not specific propositions such as endorsing a big bang theory of the beginning of the universe, prohibiting murder, or recommending a behavioral psychology are included within those worlds. The fact is that philosophers do not now, nor have they ever taken lightly their own or competing claims about the world view which is most serviceable within our respective intellectual communities. Consequently, philosophy is intolerant of aimless speculation, contradiction, imprecision of expression or any other intellective act that may prevent a person from constructing a serviceable world view suitable to a given purpose

or purposes. This respect for error and intolerance of pointless chatter is so ingrained in philosophy that the presence or absence of these attributes can be used by public school teachers and administrators to assess whether or not a given curricular practice counts as pre-college philosophy. For example, educators using the criteria of respect for error and intolerance of aimless speculation can distinguish philosophy from most programs of values clarification. Values clarification requires only that reasons are given for conclusions not that the reasons given are necessary or sufficient for supporting the conclusion or in some other way essential to constructing a serviceable world view.

If pre-college philosophy is to succeed, let it succeed on its own merits. If it fails, let it fail on its own merits. However, the assessment of programs in pre-college philosophy can be responsibly managed only by first getting clear on what counts as philosophy. To do this educators are going to have to start talking to the discipline-specific experts, namely, philosophers, and not just to one another. Similarly, if pre-college philosophy is, so to speak, to get its day in court, then philosophers are going to have to do more than simply applaud the merits of pre-college philosophy. Philosophy is not a well understood enterprize today. Philosophers cannot hope to restore philosophy to a position of prominence in public education by keeping to themselves. They must join together with the educator, go into the classroom and make things happen. I trust the recent research efforts by the American Philosophical Association Committee on Pre-College Instruction in Philosophy is a step in this direction. I am looking forward to greater collaboration between philosophers and educators.

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